Gaganendranath Tagore



ACADEMY OF FINE ARTS





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GAGANENDRANATH TAGORE

About twenty years ago Gaganendranath Tagore—a great painter of Bengal, passed away. He was one of the three contemporary geniuses—Poet Tagore and his painter nephews, born in the same family. Rabindranath and Abanindranath reached the summit of success and glory in their life time, and received tumultuous ovations. But Gaganendranath took his exit from this world almost unnoticed, and to-day his works are perhaps less known than they were when he was alive. In the obituary of this painter nephew Rabindranath wrote, "Unfortunately for the last few years of his life Gaganendra's activities had ceased and the dark shadow of a disease that suddenly enveloped him kept him away from the outside world. This is why his untimely death has hardly been noticed as leaving any gap in our national culture. He has been deprived by an unjust fate of his due of the homage of a public mourning which all men of genius deserved immediately after death".

Many of his works have already perished, and those which have survived may meet the same fate, unless the artists and art lovers of this country make some effort to preserve them.

Gaganendranath was closely associated with his brother Abanindra in the creation of the Revivalist School of Bengal. But he never allowed himself to be influenced by any of the traditions or styles of Indian art which a large number of artists of the country were following in the wake of this new art movement. He found guidance and the goal for his art in nature and in the environment around him, and produced paintings bearing a stamp of strong individuality. He took to painting seriously rather late, and remained an active painter for not many years, as a sudden illness incapacitated him for the last ten years of his life. But within this fairly short span of active life he was very prolific in producing sketches, drawings by the hundred in pen and brush, and many water colour paintings. From his early youth Gaganendranath had a regular habit of making quick and successful sketches of fleeting gestures and expressions of people around him. So when he started painting in earnest his brush yielded mature works straight away.

His early paintings were landscapes—mainly from memory, and figure compositions, many of which illustrated the life story of Shri Chaitanyadeb. These compositions generally show line drawings in a background of soft tone and tinted with delicate colours. He also produced several caricatures in the vein of social satire. These were bold in conception and showed excellent

draughtsmanship, but were without any malice or bitterness. They were produced almost as farces befitting the stage to amuse the spectators and make them laugh.

At the Tagore residence in Calcutta plays were written, staged and acted by the members of the family. Gaganendranath took part in these performances and proved himself a brilliant actor. Stage and drama must have influenced his mind profoundly, as his later paintings show an effect of stage settings and an atmosphere charged with the expectancy of the theatre. From the hustle and bustle of the urban scene his vision seemed to soar high into a dream-land, where he would curtain off everything that was brutal and ugly, and focus an eerie light on some flight of steps, on the courtyards and parapets of a castle or on the palace of a fairy princess. Sometimes he used purely geometrical patterns in his paintings, but he never allowed himself to make a cult of it like the cubists. It was not his intention to produce these inanimate shapes as a kind of purposeless cerebral exercise. They all had a part to play in his pictures, and as we look, they seem to come to life and start gliding, rolling and dancing before our eyes. Sometimes he would use these patterns just to produce a kaleidoscopic effect of light, and make the glimmering rays to be deflected from facet to facet of pillars, pyramids and prisms, and then to be swallowed up by semi-lucent or total darkness. In his fancy he would be a lone rider of a black horse, and visit forbidding castles or palaces of snow, or he would set out on a voyage in a dream boat in quest of far unknown lands beyond the sea. Before his gaze it seems that the visual world has lost many irrelevant details and familiar contours, and that a gigantic metamorphosis has taken place. Perhaps he anticipated what was to follow after the Revivalist School. It is possible that he had a premonition before he was finally struck down by illness, for he showed us the shadow of death whispering into his ears before it drew the curtain over him. In the serenity and calmness that pervade all his works it was evident that he faced the end with courage and fortitude.

When posterity will come to assess the contribution of artists of India of this century, I am sure that the connoisseurs in them will remember him and will endeavour to reach his abode of snow or his enchanted castle, and place a wreath in his memory on the first alter they find there.

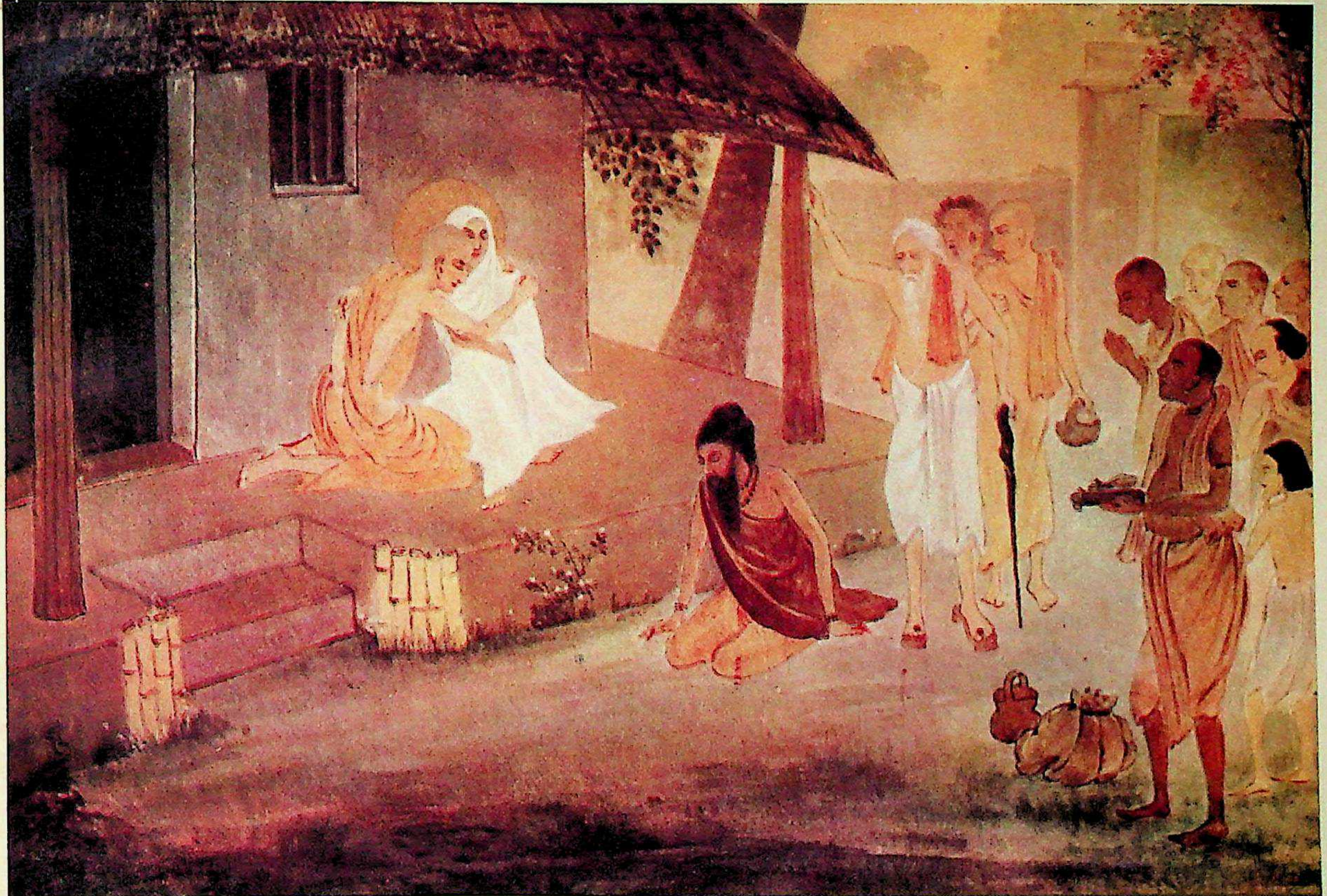
Calcutta, 1957

CHINTAMONI KAR

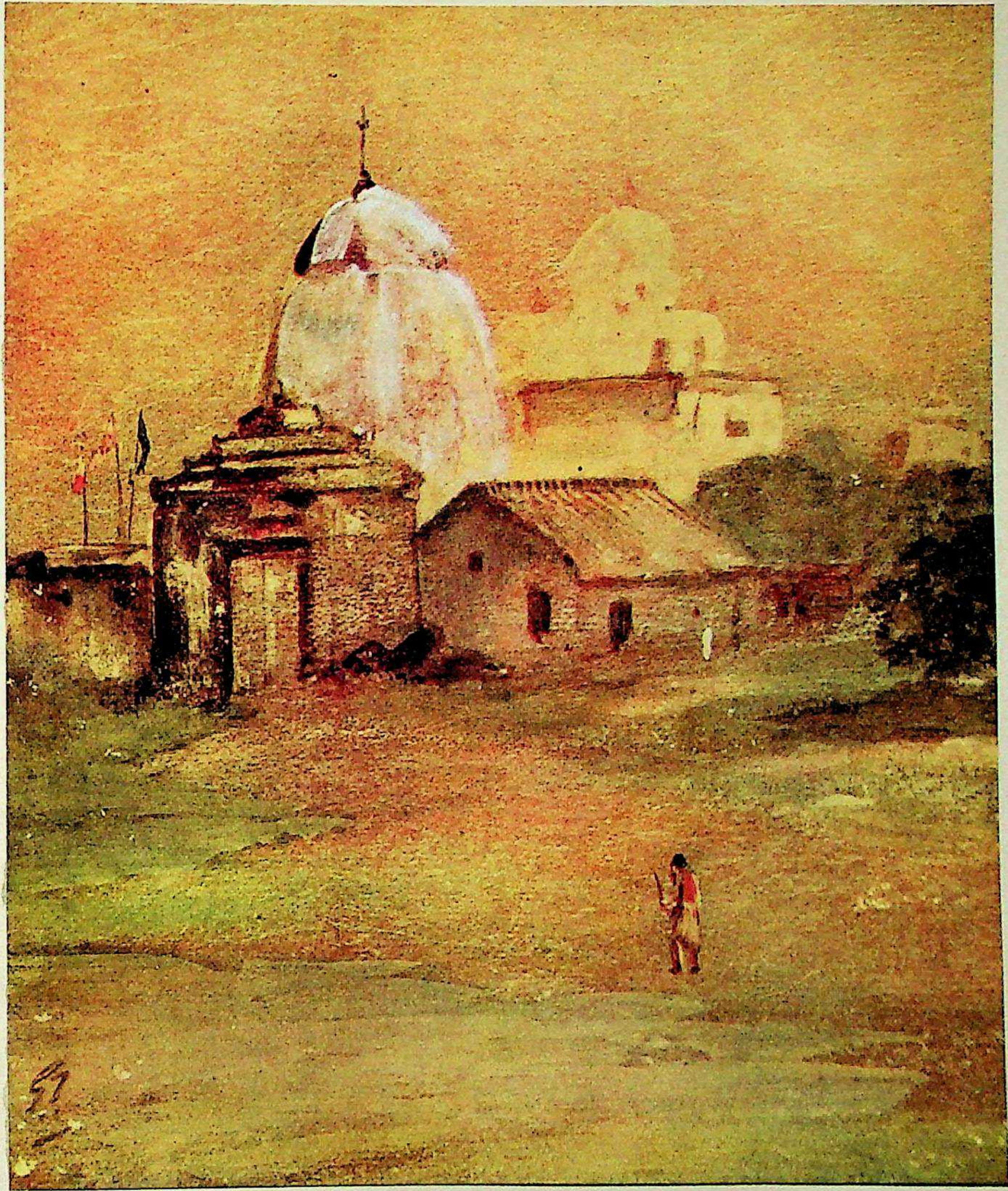
PLATES



SELF PORTRAIT



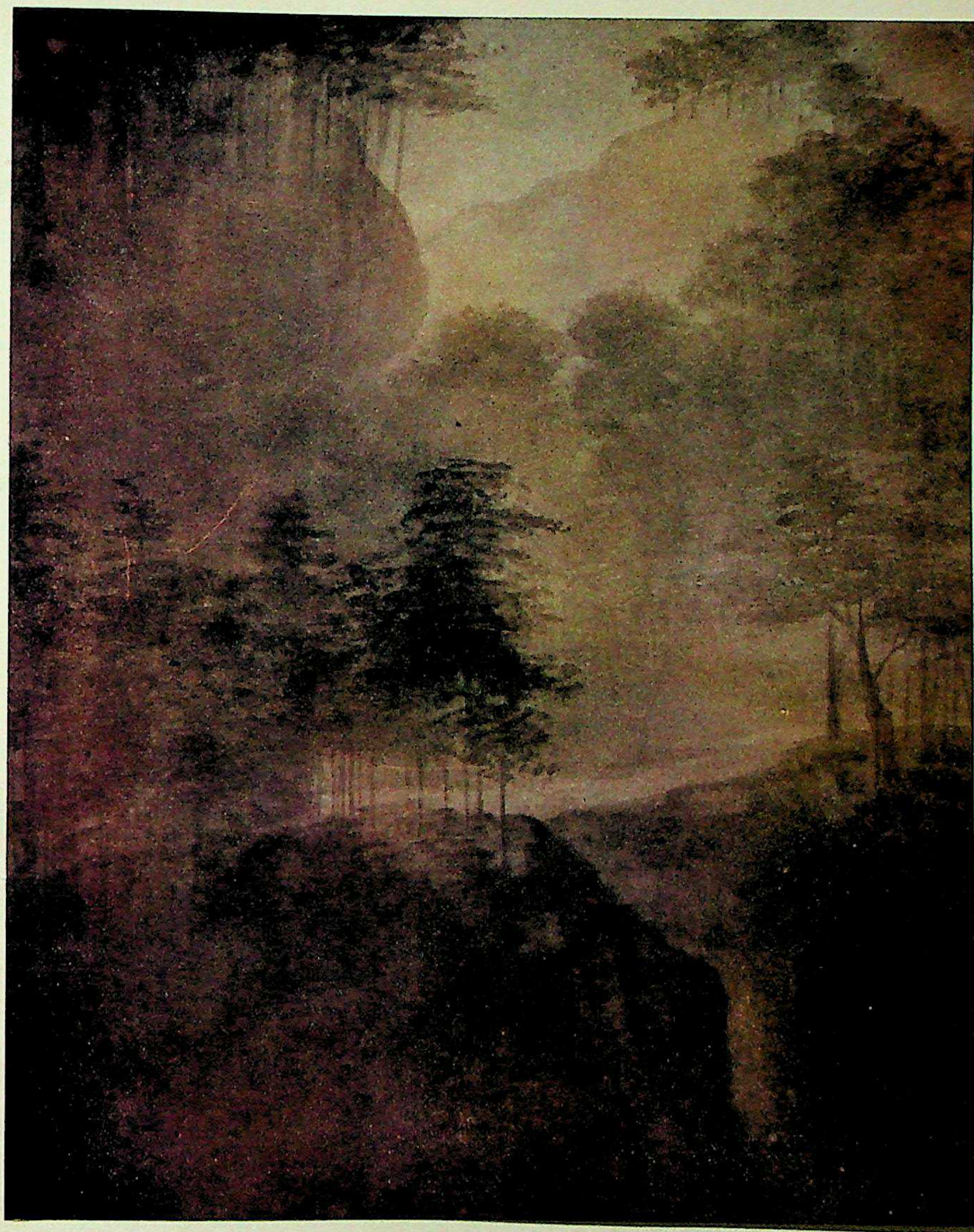
CHAITANYA BIDDING FAREWELL TO HIS MOTHER



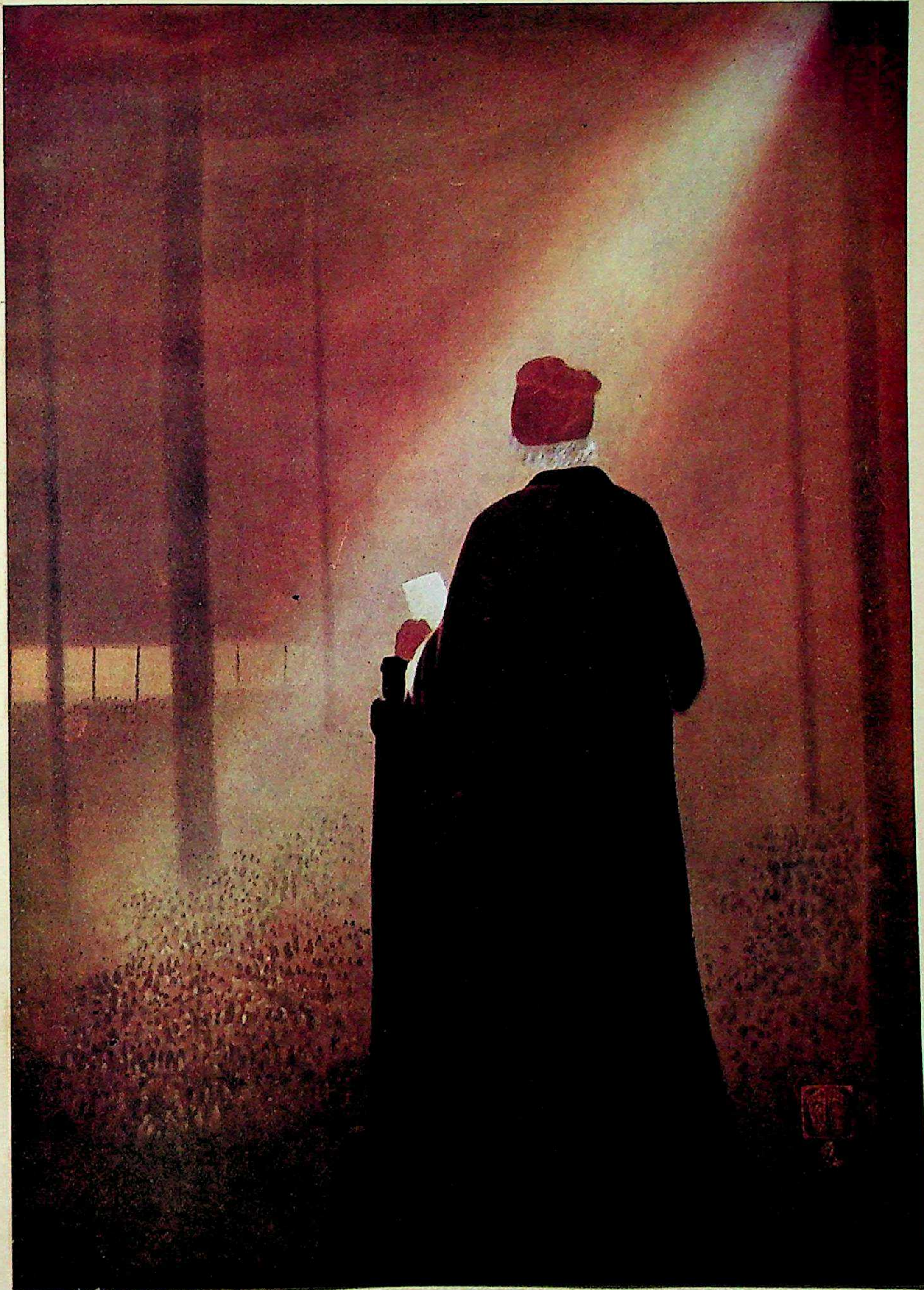
TEMPLES AT PURI



IN THE RAINS



5 A LANDSCAPE



RABINDRANATH TAGORE AT THE CALCUTTA CONGRESS



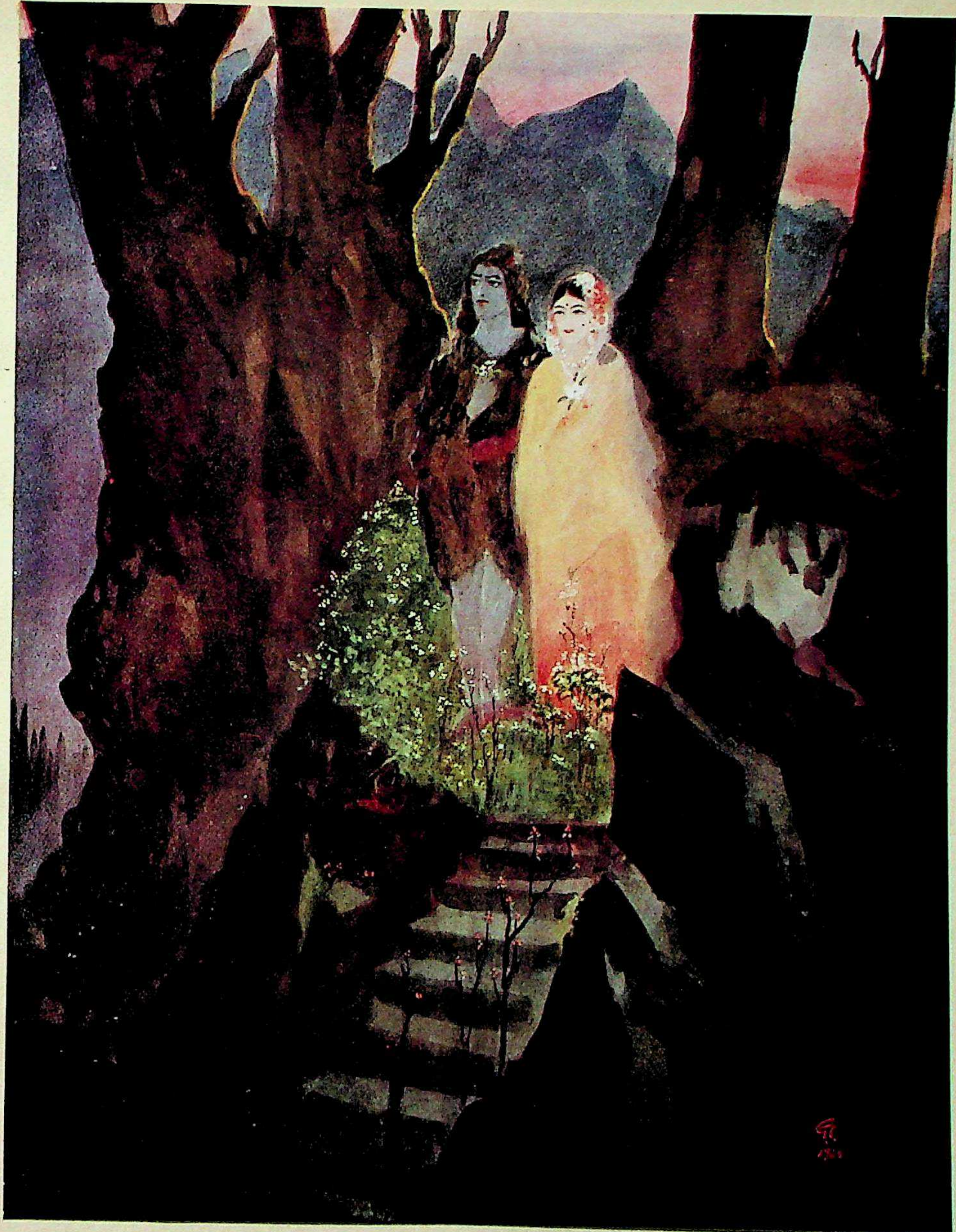
AT THE TEMPLE DOOR



THE PALACE OF SNOW



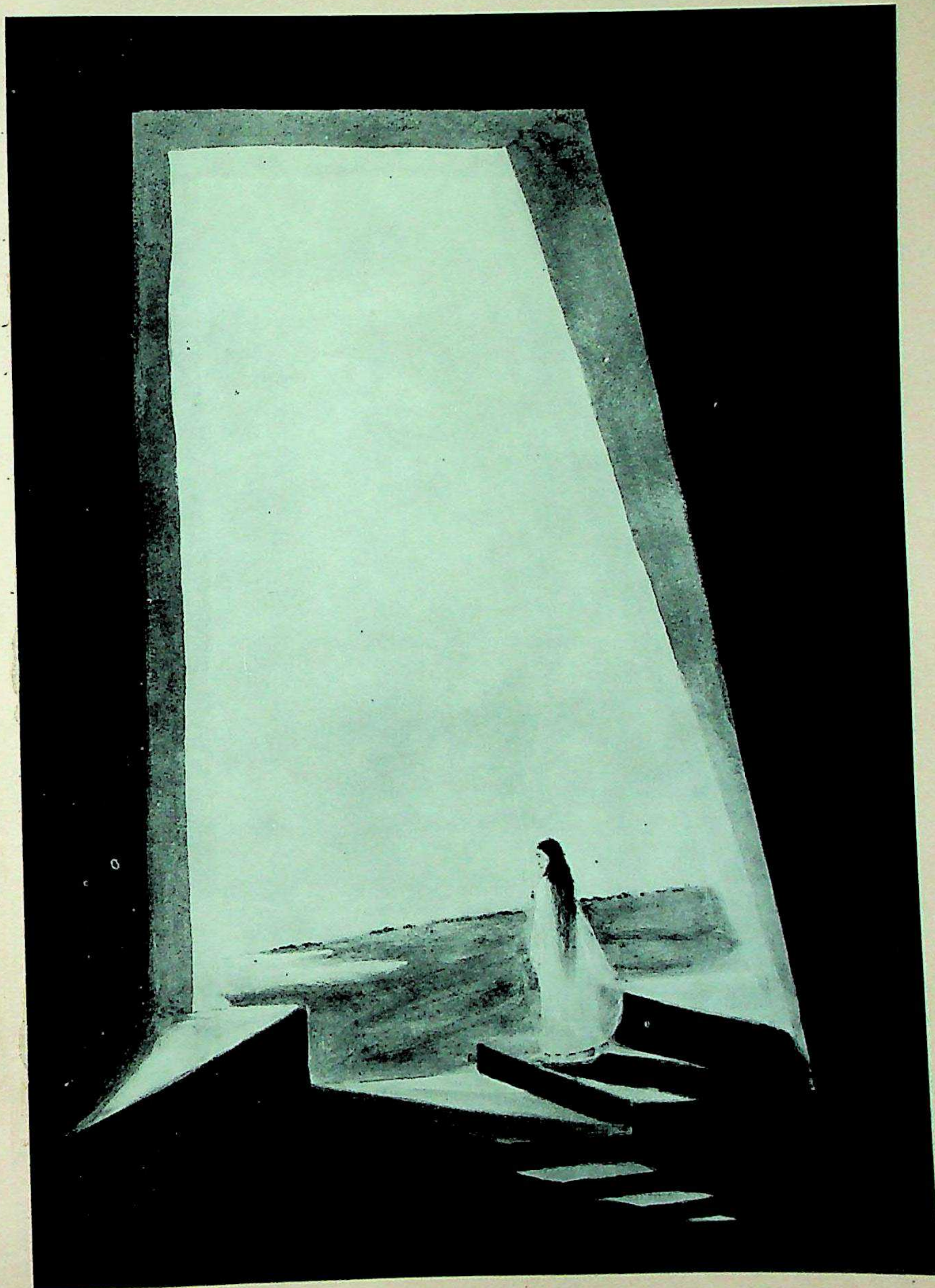
9 SEVEN CHAMPAK FLOWERS



ARJUN AND CHITRANGADA



THE COMMING OF THE PRINCES



PADMINI LOOKING AT UDAYSAGAR



THE CALL TO PRAYER

THE SONG OF THE HIMALAYAS

ACKNOWLEDGEMENT

The following blocks were kindly lent by the Prabasi Press and Visva-Bharati.

Prabasi Press

Plate No. 2, 3, 4, 5, 7, 10, 11, 12, 13, 14

Visva-Bharati

Plate No. 1, 6, 8, 9